

Joel Roberts Poinsett to Andrew Jackson, November 16, 1832, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

JOEL R. POINSETT TO JACKSON.

Charleston, November 16, 1832.

Confidential

Dear Sir, I received your very welcome letter by the hands of Mr. Breathitt yesterday afternoon, and hasten to reply to it, as that gentleman appears desirous of returning to Washington as early as possible.

His desire to return by the way of Columbia will prevent his examining the precise state of the forts and revenue cutters in our harbour; but I have undertaken to do that for him, and will from personal inspection give you all the details you require. This duty shall be performed as soon as the North Eastern gale now blowing passes over. I hope to be able to send the report so as to anticipate Mr. Breathitt's arrival. With respect to the real intentions of the Nullifiers Mr. Breathitt may be able better to ascertain them by a short stay in Columbia during the session of their convention; but in the mean time I will tell you what we believe them to be.

The principal object of these unprincipled men has always appeared to me to be to embar[r]ass your administration and defeat your election; but they have led the people on so far under other pretexts that they must proceed. They are now somewhat divided. Mr. McDuffie¹ will probably urge the convention to secede from the Union in the event of the government using any means to coerce the state. Many of their party will be opposed to such a measure. They are however so organised that if the leaders of the political club

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resolve upon this course it will be adopted. It is believed that Mr. Calhoun is against this measure and insists that the state may be in and out of the Union at the same time and that the government has no right to cause the laws to be executed in South

1 George McDuffie, member of Congress 1821–1834; governor of South Carolina 1834–1836; U. S. senator 1842–1846.

Carolina. Both parties are anxious and indulge the hope, that the general government will commit some act of violence, which will enlist the sympathies of the bordering states: provided it be not their own they care not how soon blood is shed. It will be necessary therefore to proceed with great caution in counteracting their schemes. It is probable they will proceed by writ of replevin, served on the Collector. He will resist by refusing to give up the goods and I am at present of opinion that it will be better to allow them to commit that act of violence; namely breaking open the public stores, which will rouse the indignation of the people of the United States against them. The custom house ought then to be removed to one of the forts, which can be decided upon hereafter. This desicion[*sic*] will be made with a view to repel any attack which in the wildness of their folly the Nullifiers might attempt.

With respect to the officers of government who are aiding and abetting the nullifying party, I am sorry to tell you, that there are many. The Post Office is entirely filled with them. The Post Master, His Deputy, his son, and all the clerks are active Agents of that party and clamorous Nullifiers. I have no evidence however of any letters or communications between the government and any individuals in Charleston being opened or stopped, and I must in candour state, that I very much doubt it, if I do not discredit it altogether. Such however is the common impression and I hesitate to act against the advice of my friends and to confide a letter on confidential business to the Charleston post office. I have reason to believe, that the merchants generally are not satisfied with the manner the business of the office is conducted by Mr. Bacot and I know that his dismissal will be acceptable to the

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friends of the Union in this City. He ought to be succeeded by an inhabitant of the State and a member of the union party.

In the Custom house there are many violent nullifiers, a list will be again furnished through Mr. Breathitt. The most active is I regret to say, Major Laval.² He has proved extremely ungrateful to you and there is but one opinion among us of the urgent necessity of his removal. If you could offer him a Place in New Orleans, his entire removal would be useful to the cause of the Union.

² The context suggests that he was the Capt. William Laval of the 3d infantry, who distinguished himself under Jackson at Pensacola in November, 1814.

The Officers of the army had been seduced by the attentions of the Nullifiers. Major Belton and Major Massias were very properly removed: but I was very much surprised to see Major Massias in Charleston during the last election in October. He ought to be removed so far from this city that he cannot return to it on such occasions. I would not be unjust to Major Heilman. I believe him to be an honorable man, and do not think he has been concerned in any party matters; but he is on very intimate terms with all those gentlemen, so much so that we are and would be afraid to open ourselves to him. If therefore you could send us an officer of the same rank, a Southern man if possible, we should greatly prefer it. I say Southern because prejudices have been excited against Northerners, and as it is considered a Southern question exclusively it might be politic to have it settled by Southern men. I should have preferred therefore on that account and on that account only that a Southern Navy Officer should have been sent here. I know Commodore Elliott³ and have a great personal regard and respect for him. I know of no one, who unites more firmness with consummate prudence than Elliott, but a Virginian who was true to the union would succeed better. If however Commodore Elliott does come no one will be more happy than myself to greet him and to aid him in the performance of his duties.

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3 Commodore Jesse D. Elliott, commander of the Charleston navy yard, was born in Maryland but was appointed from Pennsylvania.

You desire to know something of the character of a Mr. Simpson from whom you have received a letter. He is a very good man, a friend of the union; but is considered by us as an extremely weak man. The letter in question was not written by him. I heard the history of it after it was sent. He had, he said known you in Nashville and he asked a respectable gentleman who stands very high in our union ranks to write you a letter for him, which he accordingly did and availed himself of the opportunity to relate what he believed and what is the general impression.

Mr. Breathitt has put some queries to me, which I will answer here. He wishes to know if the Civil Jurisdiction of So. Ca. extends over the bay and harbour of Charleston? It does. Sullivan's Island is attached to Christ Church parish the rest of the bay to St. Philips. Whether before the date of the federal constitution that state had established Courts of admiralty, and whether she now has any such Courts? The admiralty Court existed before the revolution and was continued until the adoption of the present federal constitution when it ceased altogether.

I mentioned to you in a former letter, that some arms and ammunition ought to be sent here. The union party require to be armed to repel lawless violence and I will endeavour to organise them for that purpose. Hand grenades and small rockets are excellent weapons in a street fight and I should like to have some of them. A few of the United States Rifles would be serviceable, say one hundred, and with one sent to me I would instruct the men in the use of that formidable arm. They must be furnished with bayonets. These arms can be kept in the United States forts and will only be called for for self protection and in defence of the laws. I wish some of our small vessels of war would look into this harbour. If they should require repairs so much the better. They can be done [here] as well as elsewhere and if they cost a few dollars more, it matters not to the govt.: the good such expenditures will do is very great. The discontent at no part of the revenue raised from

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among us being expended among our citizens is general and every opportunity ought to be seized of allaying this cause of discontent.

I hope you may be able to sooth the conflicting parties and to unite all the patriotic men in Congress in one effort to support the laws and to cooperate with you in your praiseworthy determination by every legal and constitutional means to preserve the union. You may rely upon the aid of all the brave and patriotic men, who compose our party in this city and state.

I am Dear Sir, respectfully and with great regard,